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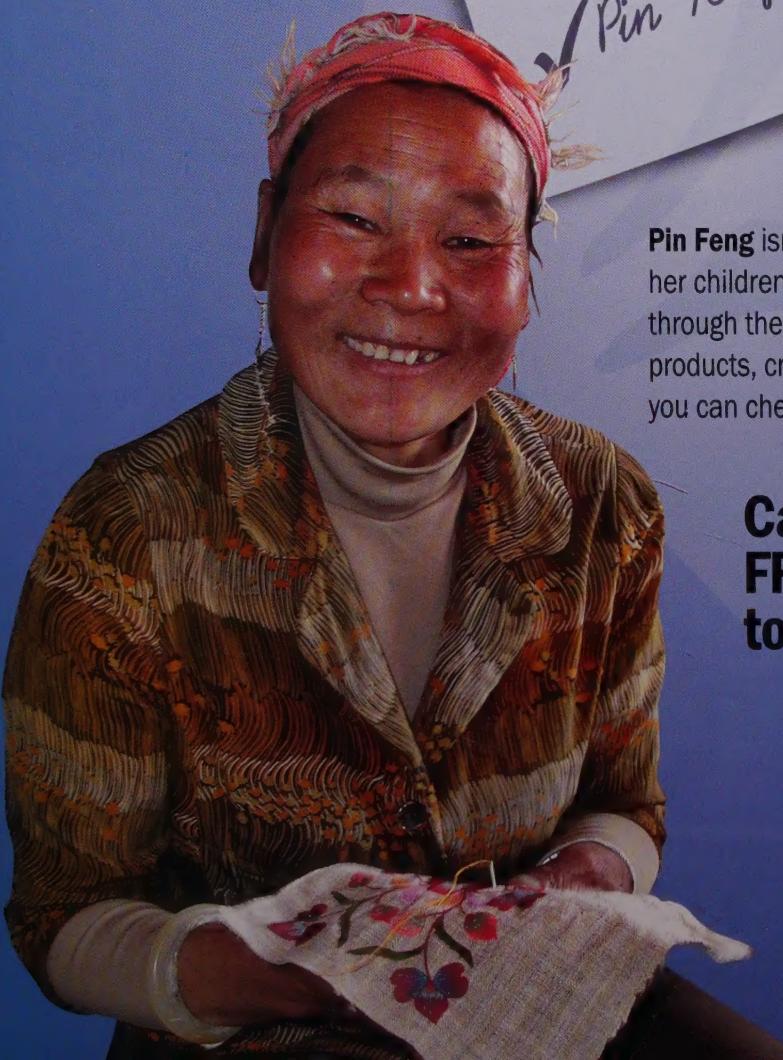
The Vulnerable Outsider
From Fearful to Faithful
Hospitality and the Kids' Table
We Give Thanks



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- ✓ Grandma - Christmas angel
- ✓ Pin Feng - Opportunities



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CHALLENGING COMMUNITY

VOLUME 21 NUMBER 9 NOVEMBER 2008

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VOICES

Giving Thanks

by Audrey Novak Riley

Not long ago, I visited my doctor's office for a checkup. It was perfectly routine—park the car, check in at the front desk, chat with the nurse, shake hands with the doctor, notice that he still keeps his stethoscope in the freezer, chat with him for a minute, shake hands again, check out at the front desk, and out to the car. I was on the road again in 20 minutes. Perfectly routine, like I said.

But I noticed something: I must have said “thanks” 10 times in those 20 minutes. Thanks to the kid who held the door for me. Thanks to the little girl who eagerly pushed the button for floor three. Thanks to the receptionist. Thanks to the nurse, at least twice. Thanks to the doctor, at least three times. Thanks to the appointments clerk. Thanks to the parking lot attendant.

What called forth all these thanks? Well, partly, I admit, was the habit my mother instilled in me (thanks, Mom); but a large part was sincere gratitude. Words can't express how grateful I am to my doctor and the whole crew who work with him. Where would I be without them? Merely saying “thank you” isn't nearly enough.

So how do we express gratitude when words aren't enough? A longstanding tradition among Lutheran women is the Thankoffering. A colleague tells about a friend who drove all night through a horrible snowstorm, and when she finally made it home safe and sound, she put a five-dollar bill into her Thankoffering box. When her mother heard about it,

she went to her Thankoffering box and put in a twenty!

What are you grateful for? How do you express it? Do you put a little something in your Women of the ELCA Thankoffering box?

The Thankofferings you and your unit send to Women of the ELCA are the main source of financial support for the churchwide women's organization. Everything the churchwide organization does is dependent on your generosity.

What do your Thankofferings do? They make possible the many resources and programs that you, your congregational unit, and your synodical women's organization find so valuable. They're used to train your synodical treasurers and other officers. They support the activities of the churchwide officers and executive board. Your Thankofferings make it possible for us to bring the most inspiring and exciting speakers, preachers, and musicians to Women of the ELCA events, including the Triennial Gatherings. Your Thankofferings also make it possible for us to make our annual gift to the ELCA, which supports hunger ministries and much more.

On page 32, you'll find a devotion and resources that might be helpful as you think about your Thankoffering or plan a service for your women's group.

Your Thankofferings make it possible for the churchwide organization to serve you. We're grateful. Thanks. 
Audrey Novak Riley, associate editor of *Lutheran Woman Today*, is grateful for dedicated readers among many other things. Thanks!



GIVE US THIS DAY

A Place in Community

by Marj Leegard

It seems that just as we settle into our spot something changes and we are suddenly in a new spot. We are so busy trying to get our own footing that we seldom have time to worry about a newcomer in our midst. Since the days of our great-grandmothers who crossed oceans and traveled in wagon trains, most of us are settled into a community. Even then, our community changes as we move from childhood to young married life and then to grandparenthood—with alarming rapidity.

A new woman in our community looking for a good source of food for her family and their cattle would hardly be on the top of our must-call list. “Immigrants,” we would whisper and wonder how legal they were.

Naomi was in that position once but soon a community formed. Her sons married. Family was her first community, and it was enough for a while. Naomi shook her head as she saw and smelled and tasted the food her daughters-in-law cooked. She tried to teach them her ways, but then she tasted the garlic and onion and it was good. They shared the ways of food. Their relationship was on firmer ground. And then her sons died.

The bereft mother-in-law had no community left. And then she remembered home. She still had property that belonged to her husband. She had relatives there. That was where she belonged. Elimelech died and Naomi turned herself toward the road. It wasn’t long before she heard a disturbance behind her. The muffled crying matched

her own, and she turned to look at Moabite country once more and there she saw her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, close behind her. This could not be! They had mothers who would grieve if their daughters left them.

My great-grandmother left New York state to come to the western wilderness, Minnesota, even though her mother could not bear to see her young married daughter go so far alone. She had an adventurous husband. Jenny Parker became the mother, grandmother, and great-great-grandmother of a host of Pecks, Lords, Swensons, Klomstads, and Leegards. Tucked neatly into the closing of the book of Ruth is a list of Ruth’s descendants that leads to Jesse of David and we sing of her greatest grandson at Christmas.

Naomi did not want the girls to leave their mothers and their homeland. She wiped the tears from their faces and begged them to return home. And then the beautiful words from Ruth come to us down the centuries.

Naomi and Ruth went on hand in hand. They shared the road. They shared the task of redeeming the land that belonged to Naomi. They shared their children. And they shared in the promise of the lineage of our redeemer. A stronger community could hardly be imagined for lonely women in a strange land. Women who shared tears and bits of bread and grain for flour—and all of the ordinary and the extraordinary things. 

Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.



Hospitality

AND THE KIDS' TABLE

by Christa von Zychlin

Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.

HEBREWS 13:2

As I remember it, my brother laughed so hard the milk came out of his nose, which just made everything worse. It wasn't quite Thanksgiving yet, but my older sister, at the knowledgeable age of 13, was determined to show our guest a genuine American meal. And what could be more American than turkey with all the trimmings? Herr Steltzler was a distant relative from the old country, and he was visiting his "cousins," my parents, who had immigrated to the United States just a few years before we kids were born.

So my sister Karin, fresh from her middle school home economics class, had decided to put together this pre-Thanksgiving dinner with real stuffing, from scratch. She took the sage out of the spice cupboard. Someone had given it to my parents years earlier and it had never been touched, sage not being in the repertoire of good German cuisine. "Of course it's still good," my mother said when my sister grimaced at the sticky old bottle, whose contents seemed more gray dust than green herb. "It's been sealed all these years, how could it be bad?" So Karin put me to work cutting up white bread into little squares as she

double-checked the recipe from the Betty Crocker cookbook.

It wasn't the peculiar taste of the stuffing, though, that made my brother laugh, it was the radish that Herr Steltzler was preparing to eat with a fork and a knife.

The lonely bachelor's feelings

Noticing that Herr Steltzler never touched food with his fingers, we had put bets on it, the three of us kids, how he would handle the raw vegetables, and all eyes were on him as he adroitly speared a radish from the relish plate. Up until now, Herr Steltzler had not endeared himself to the younger generation of the family, what with his stuffy ways and my mother fretting about the commotion and disorder of our tiny house. He liked to sleep late and my brother and I were tired of my parents' urgent whispers to "for heaven's sake, behave yourselves!" when we were up early and horsing around on a Saturday morning.

Sure enough, at dinner that night Herr Steltzler managed to pierce the radish with his fork and delicately cut it into even slices before putting it into his mouth, little forkful by little forkful. My

brother's mouth started twisting, holding back his laugh, when my sister, wanting to demonstrate her mastery of European manners as well as American cooking, reached for a radish herself, trying to imitate Herr Steltzler's niceties. But Karin's radish slipped out from under her fork, shot across the table, bounced onto the floor, and rolled under the kitchen stove. That's when my brother laughed until my mother had to send him out into the only bathroom of our house, which unfortunately was right next to our little dining nook, so that we all had to hear his laughing and coughing and sputtering, and then the water splashing away the evidence of our family's shocking table behavior. Herr Steltzler never blinked.

In the end, it was ironically only Herr Steltzler's presence in our home that saved my brother and me from a sound spanking. What we were not spared, and what still stings in my memory, was my mother's quiet lecture about hurting a lonely bachelor's feelings. What a new thought it was to me, that such a strange man's feelings could be hurt just by kids laughing. For years afterward, I wished we could

invite him a second time, to show him that we had learned a thing or two, but Herr Steltzler never visited us again.

The hospital cafeteria

For years we didn't celebrate Thanksgiving at our house because my parents hadn't caught on to this great American ritual. "Every day should be Thanksgiving day," said my mother, "How is it showing thankfulness to have you stuff yourself on this certain Thursday in November?"

By the time we kids were old enough to insist on the traditions we learned about in school and from our friends, my mom had begun full-time work at the St. Anthony hospital cafeteria. Her English was still awkward, so this was a dream job, and with benefits! It also meant that for holidays, she volunteered to work the long shift, knowing she'd be earning time and a half.

At about six in the evening, towards the end of her shift, when the number of hospital staff and visitors had trickled down to a few, our family would troop in, and my mother would take off her white smock and hair net and join us as we picked up our big plastic trays. Her co-worker Frieda would stay a little longer, making sure that my brother got an extra scoop of mashed potatoes, and that I got the biggest slice of pecan pie.

My mother would introduce us to a few of the doctors at the hospital and I remember how some of them nodded and looked over our heads when they said, "Pleased to meet you," but one of them seemed genuinely interested and stooped down to tell us what a hard worker my mother was, and how it made a meal taste better when it was served with a smile. Then he gave us all yellow smiley face key chains, which I used for years, even after I found out the smiley face was an advertisement for a strong prescription laxative.

The language school

When our two oldest sons were toddlers, my husband and I left the United States to spend a year in France as we were trained for our future work in Africa. At the language school we were part of a community of expatriates: Danes, Swedes, Norwegians, a German family, and a Finnish family, all of us struggling mightily with French language and culture. Most of us had a baby or two that we were trying to raise far from the help of grandparents or aunts and uncles.

To alleviate homesickness, the Norwegians would have Norwegian nights and the Danes would host Danish nights, so as November approached, we Americans decided we would host an American Thanksgiving dinner. We invited

the whole language school, including our French teachers, asking each nationality to bring a traditional ethnic dish to share.

The Swedes brought a potato and anchovy casserole, a combination none of the rest of us had ever considered, but which proved surprisingly delicious. The Germans brought torte—five layers of cake, cream, and berries topped off with an impossibly delectable chocolate glaze. The French brought—but of course!—wine. Bottles and bottles of wine: wine for the appetizer course, wine for the main course, wine for the dessert course. Our teetotaling Norwegian friend, Knute, blinked a few times at this extravagance, but finally even he helped himself to a glass. "After all, Jesus drank wine with meals," he explained, as if anyone else needed persuading.

The American dishes got mixed reviews: Pumpkin pie was a hit with the Germans; the French seemed intrigued by the herb stuffing; nearly everyone was horrified at the candied yams. "You Americans!" our fellow students said, shaking their heads when they saw the perfectly browned marshmallows adorning the syrup-topped yams and served as part of the main meal. "Do you serve dessert with every course? Nevertheless, all greeted the sight of *le dindon* (French for turkey) with something akin to awe. "Wow" was exclaimed in several languages as

once, then, "Magnifique!" as we remembered to practice our French.

That Thanksgiving dinner was actually an all too rare moment of international camaraderie. There were so many challenges to living in close quarters with others, especially others of different cultural backgrounds. We were amused at first to find out that a Danish-Norwegian couple was considered a mixed marriage, but we soon learned that as much as many Europeans might look the same, the differences were considerable.

One of my first shocks was when I realized that most Europeans toilet-trained their children starting, I kid you not, at 9 months old (one German mother claimed that her daughter was toilet-trained by 5 months, but all of us were pretty sure it was the mother who was trained, not the child). Yet for almost all our fellow students, the feeling was that if a child wasn't dependably toilet-trained by the great age of two, it was a sad commentary on one's parenting skills. American parents were not much admired in this regard.

One peculiarity of our older son was that he seemed to have his whole digestive system stimulated by our common meals in the dining hall. More often than not, at our evening meal, my husband and I would take turns walking the walk of shame as we carried him off with

a training pants mishap that was hard to hide.

The kids' table

The next year we were in Cameroon, Africa, for Thanksgiving, and three of us younger families were invited for the feast by an older couple who had spent decades as missionaries. I was more than a little apprehensive, but I needn't have worried. Our hosts greeted us with an exquisite table for the adults, and a kids' table with kiddie cocktails in sturdy plastic cups for the children. As soon as we had finished our dinner of big chickens and potatoes (turkeys were simply not available, but none of us minded), the children were shooed into an adjoining room, with boxes of indestructible, time-tested toys. And Ruth didn't bat an eye when it became obvious that one of the kids (not ours this time!) had filled his pants. "Oh, we've got some spares," she winked, and sent Harold off to fetch them.

"I like that lady!" My 3-year-old declared as we left that night (and I was glad that Ruth was still in earshot so she could hear this come straight from his heart.) "When can we come back here again?"

These days our Thanksgiving is usually spent at my sister Karin's home in Illinois. She definitely wins the most elegant table award of our family. My now teenaged boys' eyes shine as they look over the

offerings. Herbs and fruit garnish the turkey. Mashed potatoes that started out as whole potatoes, not boxes of flakes. Two kinds of sweet potatoes, with and without marshmallows. My sister has invited a new co-worker and his wife from Syria, and since we don't know yet whether they're Muslim or not, we forgo the bacon bits on the green beans. We know they are struggling with the language, and we work hard to understand each other.

Just before everyone is served, my sister and I can be heard chortling in the kitchen. "That sounds like a witches' laugh," my husband says. That's all right. Just for us, my sister and I always buy one can of jellied cranberry sauce, and carefully, carefully squeeze it out, leaving it in the perfect quivering shape of a can. That's how my mother did it all those years ago, when we finally started celebrating Thanksgiving at home as a real American family.

It's Thanksgiving again, and we are so thankful for the hospitality we have received and the angels we often meet when we are the ones who get to serve. 

The Rev. Christa von Zychlin and her husband, the **Rev. Wayne Nieminen**, are finishing their call as pastors in Hartland, Wisconsin, and preparing for missionary service through the ELCA with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Hong Kong. Next year they will be experiencing a totally new kind of Thanksgiving dinner!



CALENDAR NOTES

November

compiled by Audrey Novak Riley
from sources including Evangelical
Lutheran Worship (ELW), Sundays
and Seasons, and Lutheran Book
of Worship (LBW), published by
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As the autumn landscape turns from green and gold to brown and gray, the church remembers all those who have died in Christ, those whose baptism is complete. And the texts for November turn toward the day of the Lord, the day when our creation, redemption, and salvation will be complete.

1 All Saints Day

This ancient feast reminds us that the church is more than just us few believers gathered in this one place at this one time—the communion of saints transcends boundaries of race, language, condition, place, and time.

2 All Saints Sunday

The texts appointed for All Saints Sunday remind us of who is a saint in God's eyes: Revelation 7:9–17; Psalm 34:1–10, 22; 1 John 3:1–3; Matthew 5:1–12.

2 25th Sunday after Pentecost

Most congregations will celebrate All Saints Sunday today, but the texts for Sunday are worth pondering in your devotions. How do the prophet's fierce words in the first reading harmonize with Jesus' calmer words in the gospel? The texts appointed for Sunday are Micah 3:5–12; Psalm 43; 1 Thessalonians 2:9–13; Matthew 23:1–12.

3 Martin de Porres, renewer of society

Healer, counselor, founder, gardener: Is there anything humble Martin could not do? His own community of Dominican friars called him “father of charity.”

The sick, the poor, and the orphaned in his care would agree; the cats and dogs in his clinic would too. Martin died on this date in 1639.

4 Election Day

Although this day is not on the church's calendar, you might pray today for wisdom and discernment among those who vote, and for wisdom and humility among those who seek to be elected. (And then take a friend with you to vote!) Four Lutheran leaders, including ELCA Presiding Bishop Mark S. Hanson, wrote to the presidential candidates this past summer: For what they said, see <http://archive.elca.org/bishop/messages/candidatesletter.html>

9 26th Sunday after Pentecost

Now the church turns toward thoughts of the Second Coming—and we know neither the day nor the hour. Keep awake! The Scripture passages appointed for today are Amos 5:18–24 or Wisdom 6:12–16; Psalm 70 or Wisdom 6:17–20; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18 or Matthew 25:1–13.

11 Veterans Day

On this day in 1918, the Armistice ending the Great War (now known as World War I) was signed and the guns fell silent over the battlefields of Europe. Let us pray today that swords may be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks and that humanity may study war no more, as the prophet Micah wrote (4:3).

1 Martin of Tours, bishop

This Roman soldier was baptized after his act of charity—sharing his warm cloak with a ragged beggar on a winter day—brought him a dream of Christ wearing the cloak. Later, as bishop, Martin worked tirelessly to bring the Good News not only to city dwellers but also to peasants and tribespeople all over his vast diocese. At the end of his long life, as he lay on his deathbed in a distant outpost of the diocese, his followers begged him not to leave them, fearing what the pagans would do to them once their courageous bishop was gone. “We know you long to be with Christ, but your reward is certain and will not be any less for being delayed,” they said. And he replied by praying, “Lord, if your people still need me, I am ready to do the task.” Martin was buried in his cathedral in Tours on this day in 397.

An old custom is to name a baby after the saint on whose day the baptism falls. Martin Luther was baptized on this day in 1483.

6 27th Sunday after Pentecost

The prophet’s words leave us shaken, but Jesus’ words in the gospel leave us resolving to invest our talents more wisely. The passages appointed for today are Zephaniah 1:7, 12–18; Psalm 90:1–8 (9–11), 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1–11; Matthew 25:14–30.

17 Elizabeth of Hungary, renewer of society

This young princess, brought up in luxury, was devoted to the care of the poor and suffering. She founded a hospital at the foot of the mountain below her castle home, and countless hospitals in Europe and the United States are named after her. She died on this date in 1231.

19 Gertrude of Helfta, renewer of the church

Gertrude, with Mechthild of Magdeburg and Mechthild of Hackborn, is commemorated on the Episcopal calendar. All three of these German medieval mystics were sisters at the Cistercian foundation at Helfta, which the women touring Germany on the Women of the ELCA 20th Anniversary trip visited.

Most of Gertrude’s mystical experiences came to her as she participated in the liturgy with her sisters in their chapel. How does worship with your community nourish your spiritual life?

23 Christ the King

Last Sunday after Pentecost

Today’s gospel tells what kind of king our Lord Jesus Christ is. The texts appointed for today are Ezekiel 34:11–16, 20–24; Psalm 95:1–7a; Ephesians 1:15–23; Matthew 25:31–46.

27 Thanksgiving Day

What are you thankful for? I’m thankful for you and your dedication to the life of the church. Today’s texts are Deuteronomy 8:7–18; Psalm 65; 2 Corinthians 9:6–15; Luke 17:11–19.

30 First Sunday of Advent

And now the church opens a new calendar for a new liturgical year. This is Year B of the three-year lectionary cycle, the year when we hear most often from the Gospel of Mark in our Sunday readings. The texts appointed for this first Sunday of Advent (and of Year B) are Isaiah 64:1–9; Psalm 80:1–7, 17–19; 1 Corinthians 1:3–9; Mark 13:24–37.

Live in the Light
1 John 1:7

Self-Care for the Caregiver

by Lois D. Knutson

Ann and Stan had been married for 58 years. Until recently, they had been active church members. Ann's cancer was in remission, but she suffered from painful fibromyalgia and arthritis. Stan had a form of dementia. He still lived at home because Ann insisted on caring for him.

Stan was incontinent, fell out of bed often, hallucinated, was barely responsive, and was occasionally abusive. Ann tried to do everything for Stan at home, helping him with his most basic needs. She was also responsible for all the household chores. And because Stan had managed their finances and medical forms until his illness, she had to learn how to do that, too. Stan did attend adult day care twice a week, and for that Ann was very grateful. Still, she was worn out and depressed. She developed high blood pressure and severe back pain. Their only child was disabled, lived in a group home in another city, and was unable to help.

When **Sally** was downsized out of her job of 25 years, her parents offered to pay her to take care of them. They wanted to spend their last years in the home they had lived in all their married life. Sally weighed the pros and cons, and decided she was called by God to take care of her parents.



Being single and an only child made the decision easier for her.

After her mother died, Sally's father began to need more help and attention. The result was that Sally could no longer leave the house to shop, play tennis, or go for walks. Because her father's sleep was increasingly interrupted by a need to visit the bathroom, neither of them felt very rested. Sally began to develop her own health problems, so she increased the hours that professional home health workers provided for her father. That and respite care services enabled her to leave the house, attend worship, and get some much needed time to herself.

Marianne was a successful businesswoman who lived halfway across the country from her mother, whose health was deteriorating. She made several expensive trips to spend time with her mother and arrange for her care before she made the risky decision to take a leave of absence from work and stay with her. She realized she might not have a job when she returned. Her father had died three years ago. Although she didn't attend church regularly, Marianne did believe in eternal life through Jesus' death and resurrection, and she felt that God was calling her to be near her mother as she died.

Caregiving as a calling

Being a caregiver can be a calling from God. Nonetheless, it can be overwhelming. It is an honor and a blessing; but it can also be disheartening and exhausting. Perhaps you care for a spouse, an adult child, a parent, or another loved one near death. Maybe you care for someone in your home or you visit her regularly at a hospital or nursing home. If you don't care for someone now, the time will surely come.

How does a caregiver not lose heart? How can a caregiver avoid being discouraged? If you are a caregiver, how can you maintain the emotional and psychological strength it takes to care for someone you love?

First, consider caregiving a spiritual calling from God, based upon Luke 10:27: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and love your neighbor as yourself."

If we follow this commandment to love God, neighbor (the person we are caring for), and self, God gives us peace that boosts our spirit. As a result, we do not give up, even when faced with the most stressful challenges. We know that God loves us, inspires us, strengthens us, and guides us.

Second, take care of yourself, both spiritually and psychologically. The wellbeing of caregivers is important to God, to our loved ones who need care, and to ourselves. If we do not take care of ourselves, our effectiveness as caregivers will diminish. So pray, exercise, seek counsel, and hire outside help to help you with your responsibilities.

Third, use the practical tips that follow in the rest of the article. You may also search out help for your specific type of caregiving situation by visiting Web sites listed in Health Wise (see page 16).

Taking care of a loved one

Whether you take care of your spouse, whom you have lived with and loved for many years, or a parent or sibling, there are a few things to keep in mind.

First and foremost, love yourself. In addition to being a spiritual command, loving yourself means taking care of yourself. And that's important—exhaustion can lead to your own illness. If you are sick, you are less able to care for yourself or your loved one.

Ask for help—from family members, friends, caregiver support groups, pastors, professional counselors, home health care agencies, and respite care agencies.

Use a scale of one to 10 to periodically (and honestly) evaluate your ability to continue to provide care, both physically and psychologically.

Take care of your spiritual needs. Create a prayer corner with a comfortable chair and small table for your Bible. Keep a list of your favorite Bible verses nearby, along with a candle or treasured spiritual keepsake. Just as Jesus withdrew to a quiet place to pray, this can be your quiet place to get close to God. Go there before your loved one wakes up, or when he or she is napping or attending adult day care. Write down and revisit personal affirmations that boost your spirit.

Think ahead. When you drive your loved one to medical appointments, take along an updated medical information form with notes on current medications, names of physicians, and symptoms or behaviors. Allow extra time when going to appointments. It takes time to get two people ready, into the car, and into the building. Visit the washrooms before an appointment so you and your loved one are not anxious while waiting to see the doctor.

Taking care of a loved one in your home

Before deciding to take care of a parent or other loved one in your home, discuss with each other the challenges of living together. Consider whether the home is big enough for everybody's personal items and privacy. Do you have children living at home? Is there a pet involved? Are there thermostats in each sleeping area of the house—which might be needed to regulate the differences in a younger and older person's body temperature? Hold regular conferences (on the telephone or in person) with siblings so they will know what help you need with doctor's visits, finances, chores, and medical decisions.

Develop caregiving goals that move beyond tasks. For example, set a goal to help your parent experience unconditional love and honor. Remember to respect her values and wishes.

Do your best to make her life easier; help with her spiritual life and offer a peaceful existence.

Engage in your own spiritual self-care. Know that you will become weary at times. When you're tired or discouraged, focus on the blessings of caregiving such as knowing you will one day look back on this period and recall it as some of the last days you spent with your parent.

Dying and death

What is important for caregivers whose loved ones are nearing death?

As early as possible, encourage your loved one to complete a health care directive and plan a memorial or funeral service. You might ask questions such as, "Is there anything you'd like to say to anyone before you die?" or "What do you look forward to the most in heaven?"

Since spiritual caregiving takes on its deepest dimension toward the end of your loved one's life,

consider the following caregiving goals: I will help my loved one draw close to Jesus so that she will die in spiritual peace. I will keep her as comfortable as possible as the end draws near. I will relate to her in such a way that after her death, I will be at peace because I know I cared for her with Christ-like love.

Honor your loved one with tenderness, dignity, respect, compassion, and love. Make her (and only her, not other relatives or visitors) your focus at her bedside. Read recommended Bible passages—to her, and to yourself when she is resting. Tenderly and intentionally say good-bye to your loved one. Say "I love you" many times. Tell her how important she has been in your life and assure her that she will always be important to you. Thank her for everything she did for you and tell her about the most important things. Affirm her for being courageous and loving, and other attributes that apply. If necessary, give her permission to die.

All of us want to be tender-hearted, kind, competent, and compassionate caregivers. As we place a spiritual focus upon our caregiving role, God fills us with inspiration and peace so that we do not lose heart. God's heart continually touches our hearts and fills us with love so that we can fulfill our spiritual calling.

Sometimes caregivers are not thanked for what they do and who they are. Today I say, "Thank you. Thank you for being a caregiver."

The Rev. Lois D. Knutson is the author of *Compassionate Caregiving—Practical Help and Spiritual Encouragement* (www.bethanyhouse.com). She is a chaplain at Bartels Lutheran Retirement Community in Waverly, Iowa, and a speaker on topics of caregiving and aging. She is also her mother's primary caregiver. You can reach her at kairostpt@yahoo.com.

Caregiver Burnout

by Molly M. Ginty

How to bandage wounds. How to move an invalid from the wheelchair to the bed. How to dress someone who's unable to move the entire right side of her body.

That's just some of what Liz de Nesnera has learned since her mother suffered a massive stroke and de Nesnera, who works as a voiceover artist in Compton Lakes, New Jersey, became her caregiver 14 years ago.

"My biggest lesson has been learning to avoid burnout," says de Nesnera. "When you're a caregiver, you need to remember to nurture yourself or you'll get physically and emotionally exhausted."

Some 50 million Americans care for ailing loved ones, and 60 percent of these helpers are women. Though they offer \$306 billion in services each year, their reward is often little more than skyrocketing stress and a higher risk of getting sick themselves. During November (National Family Caregivers Month), health advocates are working to spread the message that only by looking after yourself can you effectively care for someone else.

Strained muscles from hauling and lifting. Worry over mounting medical costs. The disorientation of having parent-child roles reversed. Resentment toward family members who aren't doing their part. Isolation as you're forced to take time away from friends. Frustration at your own shortcomings. Anger at the loved ones who are

consuming your life, combined with heartbreak because they are slipping away.

These are among the many challenges that caregivers face—and they often grow more pressing as health conditions worsen.

Consider de Nesnera's case. A year after her mother's stroke, de Nesnera also became her father's caregiver, nursing him from the time he developed Alzheimer's disease at age 76 until his death at age 83. De Nesnera cleaned, cooked, and did laundry for both parents. She sold their New York apartment, moved them to their vacation house upstate, paid their bills, and shuttled them to doctors' appointments. As their health declined, she eventually moved them both into the New Jersey condo she shared with her husband.

"I was there when my father left the teakettle boiling so long it melted onto the stovetop," says de Nesnera. "I was there when my mother fell out of bed and broke her shoulder. I helped them—or found help—all while juggling a full-time job."

The backache de Nesnera developed and the crying fit she had when she realized she was so overwhelmed that she took her mother to adult daycare for the first time are typical of overtaxed



caregivers. The federal Department of Health and Human Services reports caregivers like de Nesnera are twice as likely as non-caregivers to have health problems including depression, anxiety, cardiovascular disease, and alcohol or drug addiction.

Left unchecked, these problems can grow deadly. Stress can shave up to 10 years off a caregiver's life, report University of California researchers. Elderly spousal caregivers have a 63 percent higher mortality rate than their non-caregiving peers, notes the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

How can a caregiver overcome these odds and take adequate care of herself?

"Admitting you've crossed the line from dutiful friend or family member to caregiver is the first step," says Deborah Halpern of the National Family Caregivers Association. "That can be difficult because it means accepting that your loved one really is frail or disabled. But only when you make this recognition will you ask for the help that you need."

Help can come from family and friends—even if it means having someone come over for a half hour while you take a walk or an hour while you go grocery shopping. It can come from other caregivers via on-line or community support groups.

It can come from doctors, nurses, books, and Web sites that can educate you. "You won't feel so helpless—or so hopeless—when you know everything you can about your loved one's condition," says Lauren Agoratus of Hamilton, New Jersey, whose 16-year-old daughter has autism and kidney problems requiring full-time care.

Assistance can also come from your employer. Research shows that 62 percent of caregivers have to make adjustments to their work lives. Communicate your needs to arrive late or work from home—and find out whether your company offers caregiver

benefits such as disability coverage, referral services, or subsidies for home health aides.

Ask for help, and it may come knocking. In Chicago, so many caregivers approached Grace Episcopal Church clergy for help that they started a support group. In Bergen County, New Jersey, community needs prompted the creation of an Alzheimer's hotline. In St. Petersburg, Florida, neighbors raised \$3,500 to help buy a wheelchair-accessible van for the parents of a young man partially paralyzed in a motorcycle accident.

The message behind these outpourings? You're not alone. One in four households provides care for an elderly relative, and caregiving needs are projected to triple by 2050 because people over age 85 are the fastest-growing segment of the population.

Above all, say experts, address your own health needs. Eat well, sleep well, and exercise. Get checkups and massages, and get out of the house to watch a movie with friends. "Caregivers tend to neglect their own wellbeing," says Dr. Peter Reed of the Alzheimer's Association. "But if you want to be a better caregiver, you need to take care of yourself." 

Molly M. Ginty lives in New York. Her work has appeared in *Ms.*, *Marie Claire*, *Redbook*, and *Women's eNews*.

For more information:

National Family Caregivers Association

www.nfcacares.org

Family Caregiver Alliance

www.caregiver.org

National Family Caregiver Support Program

www.aoa.gov/prof/aoaprog/caregiver/caregiver.asp

This ongoing column is part of the Women of the ELCA health initiative, *Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls*. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org for more information.



LET US PRAY

Linked Together

by Debra K. Farrington

He's one of my favorite characters from the stories of the desert fathers and mothers, those souls who went out into the desert in the third and fourth centuries to live closer to God. His name was Hero, according to the story told by theologian John Cassian (c. 360–435). Hero lived in a desert community of hermits whose dwellings were far enough apart that they didn't see each other daily, but close enough to gather for worship on Sunday. He spent his days fasting, praying, and studying, and those around him considered him very holy. The problem was that Hero, too, considered himself very holy. So holy, in fact, that he didn't need to spend any time at all with others, not even for Sunday worship.

Then one night Hero dreamed that God invited him to jump into the community's deep well from which he would emerge completely unharmed as proof of his holiness. Well, I don't know about you, but God has never suggested that I do something just to show off. Calls from God don't usually work that way. But Hero, living in isolation, was fooled into thinking that this was God's desire, and he jumped down that well without consulting anyone. He had to be pulled out of the well by brothers from his community, and he died two days later still thinking he'd heard the voice of God.

Woe to any of us who starts thinking she doesn't need community! While I'll be the first to admit that community can be difficult sometimes, none of us can discern God's hopes and desires without help. Any brother or sister in Hero's

community would have suggested that he question the voice he was hearing before jumping into that well. The 19th-century mystic Thérèse of Lisieux had a better way of plunging into God when she prayed: "Your love, Jesus, is an ocean with no shore to bound it. And if I plunge into it, I carry with me all the possessions I have. You know, Lord, what those possessions are—the souls you have seen fit to link with mine."

The communities of which we are a part—churches, circles, small groups, neighborhoods, and others—are given to us by God, who has linked our souls together. The reason for a given community isn't always obvious to me, and I don't always agree with the people around me, but I trust that each grouping of souls in my life has something to offer me, and I to them.

So I invite you to pay attention to, and hold in prayer, one of the communities of which you are a part this month. What gifts do the souls in that community bring into your life? How do they affirm you, and you them? How do they challenge you and vice versa? What do they have to teach you, and what can you help them learn? Take some time to hold that community in God's presence. Pray for their needs and give thanks for the souls that God has seen fit to link with yours. And if you sense that God is inviting you to jump into a well, check with someone else first. ■■■

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FEARFUL TO FAITHFUL

by Audrey West

The morning headlines brought news of half a dozen troops killed in Iraq, two women executed in Afghanistan, a homeless man arrested for conning the elderly woman who lives down the street, a teenager shot in a gang-related drug deal, and a local school official charged in a road-rage incident. It was enough to make us want to stay inside with the doors tightly locked. Before we were able to take comfort in our safety, however, we discovered that even this "barricade solution" was no guarantee against the frightening world outside. That same day, the television news reported that a local man, drinking his morning coffee with his wife at their kitchen table, was murdered when two would-be robbers burst through the door and shot him.

Is nobody safe? How are we supposed to protect ourselves from the terrifying things that are happening all around us? What is this world coming to?

THE GOOD OLD DAYS?

It is tempting to assume that the realities of today's society make us more vulnerable than previous generations were, giving us more reasons to be afraid than our parents and grandparents were. After all, headlines from a half-century ago did not frighten readers with reports of terrorism, homelessness, gangs, drugs, and road rage. Back then—not only in rural communities, but in towns and even cities across the United States—people slept in their houses with the screens unlatched

and the back doors unlocked. The world was much safer in those days.

Or so we like to believe.

Digging a little deeper, however, we might recall that there was plenty to fear even 40 or 50 years ago. In the time between World War II and the Vietnam War, for example, my own extended family built a cellar in my grandmother's backyard. We called it the bomb shelter, and we stocked it with canned goods and bottled water, just in case we needed to take cover there for a lengthy period of time. At school, my friends and I practiced hiding under our desks, as if the laminated tables could shield us from a nuclear weapon launched from halfway around the world. Sometimes I wondered whether children in Russia were doing the same things.

Closer to home, legalized racial segregation was still the norm in some places, and it was not uncommon to hear warnings (from both directions) about venturing across to "the other side of the railroad tracks." Our fear of the "other" is nothing new.

NO NEWS IS NEW NEWS

If newspapers, magazines, and cable television had been available in the first century, the earliest Christians would have been inundated with news reports certain to scare anybody: 18 people killed by a falling tower in Siloam, Stephen stoned to death by a mob, terrorist-zealots stirring up trouble in the city of Jerusalem as well as in small towns and villages in Galilee. They would have heard that Apostle Paul and his companions had been caught up in a riot at Ephesus and had been run out of more than one town by citizens who accused these outsiders of stirring up trouble.

As for accounts of rebellion against Roman authorities, or ethnic clashes between Gentiles and Jews, or the animosity between Jews and Samaritans, news reports were unnecessary. The earliest followers of Jesus had personal experience of those conflicts, as we see clearly in the gospels and in many of Paul's letters. Further, as had been true for most of its history, first-century Palestine was ruled by a foreign power that sent armies to maintain order, ensure the payment of taxes, and guarantee the control of the populace. It must have been a difficult time for many people, a time when peasants and wealthy landowners alike had reason to be frightened. The pervasiveness of fear may be one explanation of why the command "do not be afraid" appears more than 32 times in the New Testament.

Whenever fear takes over, it is easy to focus on the many ways that other people differ from us. At times these differences are merely interesting or entertaining, such as the sound of my spouse's Southern drawl in the midst of dinner conversation with my California family, or of my rapid-fire accent at his parents' North Carolina home. At other times, though, the differences are the focus of genuine tension and dread. In one of my classrooms recently, several students shared their experience of being lost in a nearby neighborhood where the residents "looked different from us."

They were afraid, the students said, that they would be harmed for venturing into the "wrong place," and they were greatly relieved to return to the safety of the seminary.

Imagine their surprise when one of their classmates, a young man from another country, told them that he was afraid for the same reasons, but not when he left the school. Fear came over him every time he walked *into* the building. People are afraid of one another, and the fear runs in both directions.

FROM STRANGER TO NEIGHBOR

Jesus tells a parable that recognizes the reality of that fear and suggests a way past it. While taking a road trip, the story goes, a traveler is beaten, robbed, and left for dead in a ditch at the side of the highway. People pass by, but they do not stop to help. As the victim lies helpless at the roadside, one of his enemies comes along, administers bandages and first aid, carries the wounded traveler to a local bed-and-breakfast, leaves the innkeeper a pile of cash, and promises to return later to pay for the stay and for any necessary medical care (Luke 10:25-37).

We have learned from this Parable of the Good Samaritan that Jesus invites us to be like the Samaritan, to reach out to those in need, even if they are different from us. This is an important lesson, but the parable offers another teaching as

well. It invites us to be like the traveler, to recognize and receive gifts offered, even when offered by the stranger. The parable is a two-way illustration of what it looks like to love one's neighbor.

Considered from the perspective of the traveler, the story might be called the Parable of the Samaritan and the Man in the Ditch. (The titles are not original to Jesus' parables; they are later additions by modern translators.) The traveler is in a dangerous area, a known hideout for thugs and thieves. Not only is his own life in jeopardy, but it would be foolish and risky for anyone to stop to offer help. We can imagine the man's relief, then, when a priest and a Levite approach, two religious professionals with a holy reputation. "I'm saved!" our traveler thinks to himself. But he loses hope as each one walks by. The traveler is stuck in a frightening place, longing for a friend, hoping against hope to be rescued. Just when the situation looks bleakest, God sends a most unlikely ally: a Samaritan.

The man in the ditch would not have been happy about this turn of events. From his perspective and from the perspective of the Jewish followers of Jesus, Samaritans were unclean. They had strange ideas about God and about what is holy, they did not worship correctly, they lived in separate towns and neighborhoods, they did not share the

same ideals and practices with the Jews. Because of their mutual prejudice, many Jews and Samaritans despised and feared one another.

Perhaps we are not far removed from that experience. We have our own “Samaritans,” people who differ from us in nationality, ethnicity, religious faith, customs, economic status, education, political party—and whose differences evoke our fear and sometimes our intolerance. These are the last people from whom we expect to receive anything, the folks about whom we might think if we needed assistance at the side of the road.

These are the people Jesus calls our neighbors.

A WAY THROUGH THE FEAR

The impulse to reject others due to our fears or preconceived ideas about them runs counter to Jesus’ teaching; the man in the parable would not have escaped his terrifying situation if he had been unwilling to receive the help of the Samaritan. When fear is the driving force behind our choices, however, it is difficult to recognize the gift represented by the stranger.

This is not to suggest that God removes us from all danger, or that we should blindly trust everybody and not protect ourselves in situations of real threat. After all, when Jesus sends his disciples to share the Good News, he instructs them to

be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16). It is to suggest, however, that our lives are given to us for the purpose that we might love God by loving one another, not so that we might distance ourselves from others on account of our fear. Perfect love casts out fear (1 John 4:18).

Jesus is prompted to tell the parable of the Samaritan and the man in the ditch when somebody asks what one must do to inherit eternal life. The answer? Love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself. These two commandments, to love God and love neighbor, come right out of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18), and they stand at the heart of Jesus’ teaching and his ministry. By illustrating these commandments with a story about a Samaritan and a Jew—opponents who respond to one another in unexpected ways—Jesus shatters the worldview of his followers and breaks open the grip that fear holds on our lives.

GUIDED BY LOVE

Christ’s teaching is not a pie-in-the-sky fantasy or ivory tower pronouncement, but a lesson already lived out in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. As the incarnate Son of God he experienced this world in all its fearful reality. His people rejected him and his closest followers denied

him. He knows the many reasons we have to be afraid. Despite this, his life is testimony to a reality that is guided by love, and his death forever breaks the chokehold that fear has on this world.

No doubt the TV news will continue to be bad, for that is what gets ratings. Newspapers will continue to report events that feed the lie that we are safer when we hunker down behind locked doors, estranged from our neighbors both far and near. That is what sells newspapers. But God in Christ proclaims to us the good news, which encourages and empowers us to live into a different kind of reality.

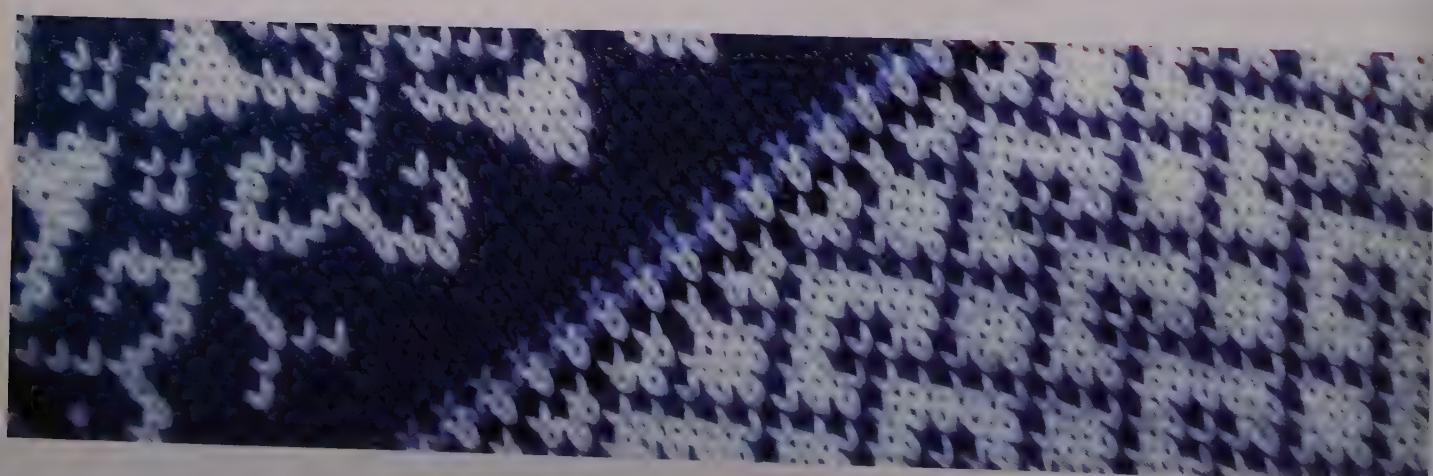
Whenever we support food pantries and homeless shelters that serve the outcast in our communities, when we break bread with strangers and friends, when we work for justice for those who live on the “wrong side of the tracks,” when we pray for our enemies who live both near and far from us, when we receive with gratitude the gifts offered by those who are “other” to us, we take our stand on the side of the One who lived and gave his life so that we might live without fear. May we go and do likewise. ■

Audrey West is adjunct professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology of Chicago and the author of the 2004-05 *Lutheran Woman Today* Bible study, “Everyday Surprises: The Parables of Jesus.” She lives in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.



THE VULNERABLE OUTSIDER

by Karen Melang



I've been an outsider before, and I'm sure you have, too. I've gone to a new place and wondered how I was supposed to act and if anyone would talk to me. I've visited a new church and hoped that I wouldn't get lost on the way back from communion and that I could figure out when to kneel and when to stand up.

I've moved into a new community and wondered if I'd ever feel at home. I've looked intently into the eyes of everyone I met in the first few weeks and thought: "Are you going to be my friend? And if you are, can we get started right away, because I need you now."

Friends tell me that being single in a crowd of couples makes them feel isolated and out of place. People with disabilities, too, say they often feel cut off from those around them by a wheelchair or a cane or something much less visible. Missing just one key ingredient that everyone else has is enough to make us feel like outsiders.

I remember going to a camp years ago in northern Minnesota. I was a young stay-at-home pastor's wife with two small children. I loved those two kids deeply and madly—and still do—but at the same time, they were driving me nuts, the way small children will.

Then came the opportunity to attend a retreat for pastors' spouses paid for by the wonderful women's organization of our congregation.

I signed up immediately. Three glorious days, I thought, away from diapers and spit-up. Three nights of solid sleep. I could not wait.

The sweaters

I arrived at the lodge and knew instantly I was in a community—a community to which I did not belong. Nearly everyone but me had on a Norwegian sweater, those lovely, heavy sweaters with the ornate silver buttons and patterns of reindeer or snowflakes or some other reminder of the cold. I was introduced to several very pleasant women whose given names I had never heard before and could not spell—Berit, Dagny, and (my favorite) Solveig.

Before we ate lunch, someone announced that we would sing a table prayer to the tune of "The Bells of Christmas Chime Once More." I told the woman next to me, "I don't know that tune." She was incredulous. "How can you be a Lutheran," she asked, mostly kidding, "and not know 'The Bells of Christmas Chime Once More?'" How could I, indeed.

Before long these dear women welcomed me into their community. They even hugged me and told me where I could get a Norwegian sweater. I went from being an outsider to being pretty close to an insider, sans the sweater. To me, their sweaters signaled their same-

ness and my difference. "You do not belong," the sweaters shouted at me, but I don't think it was the message the sweater-wearers meant to send. It was late fall after all, the time for sweaters. I'm certain now that they were simply staying warm and celebrating their heritage at the same time. I bet none of them thought for a minute that something as innocuous as sweaters could make someone like me wonder: "Am I welcome here?"

The group

We all feel more at ease in groups where people are a lot like us. People with the same history, interests, and life experiences gravitate toward each other. We are attracted to those who have about the same amount of money and dress pretty much the way we do. Sameness makes us comfortable.

Difference makes us feel vulnerable even at church retreats. The dictionary says that *vulnerable* means able to be wounded; open to attack or damage. I certainly wasn't in danger of being attacked at the pastors' spouses' retreat, but I could have been wounded by hurtful words or obvious exclusion. Of course, exactly the opposite happened. I found a community that welcomed outsiders and put me at ease.

Not every outsider is so lucky. Lots of times communities value sameness so highly that they con-

stantly take the measure of those around them. They want to calculate who is enough like them to belong—and who can be excluded.

Eventually these kinds of communities always come to the edge of sameness. The moment comes when they see too many differences, and they will quickly build walls and dig moats. “You are in,” they will say, satisfied that someone is sufficiently like them to belong. “You,” they will say to another, noting too many deviations, “are out.”

The grocery

Most cues I get from others tell me that I am “in.” But at work I encounter some people who are mostly “out.” Recently I decided to at least occasionally cross the border into their world. Personal growth, I thought.

My big foray into new territory was to visit the Latino grocery market in our small downtown. I went without the long list I take to my usual grocer. I was just going there to browse, so there was no pressure to pick up anything in particular.

I was surprised by how much energy it took to get ready for this visit. There were so many things to worry about. I fretted over if I would be able to understand any of the signs. I thought about if anyone would be able to speak English to me. I wondered how many people like me go to that store and if any-

one would think that it was weird that I was there.

None of my worries were worth having. Several employees greeted me. They looked genuinely glad to see me. I could figure out enough of the signs to manage. The store looked different than my usual market in some ways. There were not many brands I recognized. There was a meat and fish counter with items I had never seen before.

The bakery section was beautiful. Pointing, I chose a few items, even though I didn’t know what they were. I asked, and someone came to tell me about them in English, but I didn’t really understand. Whatever they were, they were wonderful.

Happy with my purchase and relieved that I had managed my exotic journey, I left the store. For perhaps 15 full minutes, I had felt like an outsider in a Latino market in a smallish city in Nebraska.

The vulnerable outsider

The Scripture has a lot to say about outsiders. Ruth, whom we have been studying, was an outsider from Moab. In a town like Bethlehem, probably everyone knew before breakfast that Naomi’s foreign daughter-in-law had come home with her.

When they saw her, could the neighbors tell that Ruth was from somewhere else? Did she look different or dress oddly? Did she

speak with an accent? Was her skin not quite the right shade? Were her clothes a little too ragged?

We know that Ruth’s status as an outsider made her vulnerable. Boaz knew it, too. He ordered his field hands not to molest this foreigner (Ruth 2:9). Naomi warned Ruth about the ugly things that might happen if she ended up in a not-so-friendly field (2:22).

If Ruth ever considered her vulnerability or felt afraid, we do not see it. She was optimistic, humble, and brave. She had only one goal: to care for Naomi, her bereaved and bitter mother-in-law.

Ruth’s story, of course, takes a wonderfully different turn. Naomi’s lovely long-range plans materialized almost beyond imagining. When the baby Obed was born, the delighted neighbor women declared that foreign-born Ruth was worth more to old Naomi than seven sons.

The lesson

Not all stories of vulnerable outsiders turn out as happily as Ruth’s did. Read any city’s newspaper or watch television or the Internet to see endings much different than Ruth’s. In a smaller and smaller world, all of us come closer to more and more strangers, no matter where we live. How will we react to those who are not quite like us? What signals will we send to outsiders? Maybe we should take a lesson from Boaz,

whose first encounter with Ruth we read about in the second chapter of the book of Ruth. As was the custom of the poor, Ruth went out to the fields to pick up what was left behind after the harvest so she and Naomi would have something to eat. Boaz noticed her immediately, and he took action to make life easier for this outsider who was helping his relative Naomi.

- Boaz welcomed Ruth with good advice and a safe place. He invited her to stay close to the women who worked for him. He assured her that he had told his men not to hurt her, and he told her where to get water during the heat of the day. He made her feel welcome by giving her information she needed about her new situation.
- Boaz judged Ruth on her own merits and not on what he'd heard about Moabites. Surprised by his hospitality, Ruth asked Boaz why he was so kind to her, a foreigner. It was, he said, because of everything that Ruth had done for Naomi—how she had cared for Naomi since her husband's death, how she had left home and family to come to a strange place, all for Naomi's sake. Boaz didn't let the fact that Ruth was an outsider blind him to her exceptional love and loyalty.

- Boaz offered Ruth the most basic hospitality—food. At dinner time, Boaz invited Ruth to join the group, and he made sure the food was passed in her direction.

- Boaz worked behind the scenes to make sure Ruth was successful. Perhaps Ruth didn't know that on orders from Boaz more grain than usual was being left behind. Maybe it took her a while to realize how much Boaz was doing on her behalf. Perhaps it was this covert kindness that got Naomi thinking about what a good husband Boaz would be for the widowed Ruth.

Surely Ruth felt vulnerable that first morning when she went to work in the field that belonged to Boaz. When she came home that evening, safe and sound, with arms full of grain, she must have been elated. She was still an outsider—maybe in some sense would always be one—but in Boaz's field she had been welcomed.

The cross

Am I welcome here or am I an outsider? Do I belong? All of us have these questions, and many of us get to answer "yes" much of the time. But no matter where we live or work, there are outsiders. Almost every classroom has them and almost every workplace. Skin color, race, economic status, and

culture are only the beginning of the long list of things that mark the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, between us and them.

Us and *them* are not categories God recognizes. No one can read the gospels without noting Jesus' warm welcome to a wildly diverse cast of characters. Both Jesus' friends and his adversaries were shocked and alarmed by the odd company he kept.

"When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself," Jesus told his disciples, determined, it seems, to make his circle of friends even wider (John 12:32). On the cross, Jesus himself is the wounded outsider, abandoned even by God. But even then, dying, his arms are stretched out in welcome and love.

Jesus calls us, too, to live as if there were no outsiders, no us and them. We can offer safety to the vulnerable and acceptance to the outsider. Living the resurrected life along with Jesus, we see plainly that all the old categories are useless now and only get in the way. Now we can stretch our arms in welcome.

Now we can look into all the faces of those who come into our lives and see not outsiders, but God's own image and likeness, strong and clear, looking back at us. 

Karen Melang is the executive director of Fremont Area Habitat for Humanity, Fremont, Neb. She is a member of the Lutheran Deaconess Conference, class of 1971.



Ruth: A Place in Community

by Gwen Sayler and Ann Fritschel

BIBLE STUDY

Theme Verse

Ruth 4:11

The Community Affirms Ruth's *Hesed*

"We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel."

Opening

Hymn "All Are Welcome" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 641, verses 1–3)

Prayer

Lovingly loyal God,
we thank you for this day
and the opportunities it sets before us.
Continue to open our hearts
to hear the adventures
to which the Spirit invites us
through our study of the book of Ruth.
In Jesus' name we pray.
Amen.

Overview

Last month, we witnessed how Ruth's *hesed* (extra-vagant loving loyalty) toward Naomi leads her to take the heroic risk of proposing marriage to Boaz even though the biblical law prohibited Jews (such as Boaz) from having any contact with Moabites. By offering herself as a surrogate mother who will bear a child for Naomi, Ruth challenges Boaz to fulfill the law of levirate marriage by providing a son, through the surrogate Ruth, for Naomi, the widow of his deceased relative Elimelech. By identifying Boaz as redeemer, Ruth further challenges him to fulfill the law of redemption by redeeming Naomi's land for her. Boaz accepts her proposal, albeit with the caution that a closer relative than he has "first dibs" on redeeming Naomi's land.

As we will see, in the book's final chapter Boaz combines the laws of land redemption and levirate marriage in an extremely creative way both to persuade the closer relative to relinquish his legal claim and to persuade the townspeople to acclaim Boaz' marriage to Ruth despite the law against contact with Moabites. The son for Naomi that God causes Ruth to conceive takes his place as a descendant of Abraham and an ancestor of King David. God's hidden hand is revealed. *Hesed* is affirmed as the quality God values most highly in determining who is welcome within the community. Through her *hesed*-inspired heroic action, Ruth takes her place as a matriarch of Israel.

After we have worked through the concluding chapter of Ruth, we will talk about the larger biblical conversation in which the book of Ruth is a partner. By entering into that conversation, we will gain resources to equip us to consider implications of our study of Ruth for our congregations' ministries in the community and in the world.

Setting the Stage: The Men's Story

READ RUTH 4:1-8.

1. Ruth 4:1-8 mentions three men or groups of men. Who they are and where they gather are important to the unfolding of the story, as is the place whose ownership is determined during the gathering. Clarify this important information by completing the charts below.

In chapter 1, Elimelech's failed lineage (1:1-5) set the stage for Ruth's heroic risk-taking *hesed* toward Naomi. In chapter 4, another episode featuring men of the community sets the stage for the revelation of God's hidden hand, culminating in the unfolding of a new genealogy. Leaving behind the rural landscape, now the action moves into the urban world in which business is transacted and legal decisions made.

In ancient Israel, men conducted business at the city gate. Now, stationed at the gate, Boaz shrewdly interweaves the biblical laws of redemption and levirate marriage to negotiate a deal that will gain security for Naomi, a lineage for Elimelech, and a Moabite wife

for the most prominent man in town. Boaz has already discerned that Ruth's *hesed* toward Naomi trumps the biblical law prohibiting contact with Moabites. Now he will have to use his best negotiating skills to persuade the community to follow suit.

The action begins as the nearer kin whom Boaz mentioned earlier (3:12) wanders past the gate. Asserting his authority, Boaz greets the nearer kin and tells him to sit down (4:1). The way he addresses him, "friend" in the NRSV, is actually closer to "so-and-so" in the original Hebrew. Boaz' refusal to call the kinsman by name is a hint of the man's lower status. In a world where names have meaning, lack of name signifies lack of meaning.

With "so-and-so" in place, Boaz summons 10 city elders—a group whose legal powers are similar to those of a city council—to witness and confirm the transaction he plans to make. Identifying Naomi's field as the subject of the transaction, Boaz cleverly uses the law of redemption to lead "so-and-so" to make a decision that he rescinds as soon as Boaz invokes the law of levirate marriage. As long as the man thinks the land will be fully his when the aged Naomi dies (under the law of redemption), he is perfectly willing to do his redemptive duty. But then when he hears that Ruth goes with the land—and with Ruth the potential for offspring of Elimelech's line who would inherit the land (under the law of levirate marriage)—he wants nothing to do with the deal. Formally renouncing his right of redemption, "so-and-so" hands over to Boaz the right to redeem the land and to acquire Ruth.

Verse number	Who (one or group)	Where they gather

By leading “so-and-so” through the transaction in a way that makes him look like a fool, Boaz deflects any hostility the elders might feel toward the Moabite Ruth onto wimpy “so-and-so.” The tactic works. The community will rally around Ruth.

2. Some of us may be surprised to find this kind of shrewd business dealing central to the unfolding of a biblical story and may wonder what all this clever negotiating over archaic biblical laws has to do with the spiritual message of the Bible. What do you think?

The Whole Community Weighs In

READ RUTH 4:9–12.

Once the transaction is made, Boaz calls on the whole community at the gate to be legal witnesses to what has just taken place (4:9). Speaking formally, Boaz declares that he has fulfilled the law of redemption by redeeming the land of Elimelech and his sons and the law of levirate marriage by acquiring Ruth the Moabite to bear a son to keep alive the name of the dead (4:9–10). Conspicuous by its absence is any mention of the law barring contact with Moabites. Boaz seems to be gambling that his *hesed* toward Naomi and Ruth, grounded in Ruth’s toward Naomi, will persuade the community to set that law aside.

Astoundingly, the community does just that. In praying that the LORD make “the woman who is coming into your house” like Rachel and Leah, the people elevate Ruth to the status of the matriarchs who bore the 12 sons who became the ancestors of the 12 tribes of Israel. By linking Boaz’ descendants to those of Perez, the community elevates Boaz to the status of the patriarch Judah whose son Perez was the result of relations with the Canaanite woman Tamar (4:11–12). A clearer willingness to set aside the law prohibiting contact with Moabites would be hard to find! (See “The Vulnerable Outsider,” page 22.)

3. The matriarchs Leah, Rachel, and Tamar were all strong characters. Your task is to characterize one of these women creatively. If your last name begins with A–G, focus on Leah (Genesis 29:31–30:14); if it begins with H–P, focus on Rachel (Genesis 29:31–30:24); if it begins with Q–Z, focus on Tamar (Genesis 38). As you read the biblical text, reflect on how you would characterize your matriarch.

If you are a visual thinker, design a quilt block, paint a picture, make a sculpture, or use some other creative means to show how you see your matriarch. If you are a more abstract thinker, make a list of attributes of your matriarch and think of one or two words that best capture who she is.

Similarities between Ruth’s and Tamar’s stories are particularly instructive. Neither woman is an Israelite, both come from ethnic groups despised by Israelites, and both are involved in fulfilling the levirate law on behalf of an Israelite. In so doing, both take the initiative to persuade the patriarch in question to fulfill his responsibility to the dead. Including Ruth in the company of these women will have great consequences for the history of Israel.

The Women’s Story: Birth, Redemption, Restoration

READ RUTH 4:13–17.

True to his word, Boaz takes Ruth as his wife. Intervening the first time, the LORD causes Ruth to conceive and bear a son (4:13). Having fulfilled her *hesed*-inspired surrogate role, Ruth steps offstage and the action re-focuses on Naomi.

When Naomi first returned to Bethlehem bitter and empty, she was greeted by the women of the town (1:19–21). These women again take center stage, celebrating the fullness with which the LORD has graciously

supplied Naomi (4:14–15). Her daughter-in-law Ruth has made possible the redemption of Naomi’s land, the restoration of her dead husband’s name, and security for her for the rest of her life. Naomi came back empty; now she is full.

As they celebrate, the women are quick to attribute Naomi’s changed fortune to the *hesed*-inspired heroic risks Ruth has undertaken on her behalf. In the ancient world, a woman’s value depended on how many sons she bore. Praising Ruth’s love for Naomi as “better than seven sons” (4:15), the women boldly acclaim *hesed* as yet more meaningful. The journey of Ruth and Naomi is a story of the extravagant loving loyalty of one woman to another as together they persist through tragedy and toil to survive and secure a future for themselves and their beloved dead. From the perspective of the local women, the *hesed* of the Moabite Ruth to her mother-in-law clearly supersedes the anti-Moabite laws.

Naomi responds by taking the child to her breast (she “became his nurse,” 4:16). The women of the town bring the story to its conclusion by naming the child Obed (“servant”) (4:17). The name is fitting; the child’s birth is a service to the entire community. Whether Naomi literally nurses Obed or whether the text is simply noting her maternal love and joy in the baby, the point is clear: Thanks to Ruth’s *hesed* toward Naomi, the story has a happy ending. The Moabite Ruth has a welcome place within the Jewish community. Naomi has security. Elimelech’s genealogical line has a future. All is well in Bethlehem.

4. Imagine that you are Naomi. What are you feeling at this point? Why? How would you feel if you were Ruth—and why?

From Obed to King David

READ RUTH 4:18–22.

The inclusion of the genealogy reinforces the priority

of *hesed* over strict obedience to exclusionary biblical laws in determining who is welcome in the community. Genealogies are important markers of personal and communal identity. Israel traced its genealogical lineage back to Abraham (Genesis 12:1–4). Perez, the first ancestor noted in Ruth 4:18, was the son of Judah, son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham. Therefore, as Perez’ great-great-great-great-grandson, Obed is a direct descendant of Abraham. Moreover, through his son Jesse, Obed is the grandfather of David. The point is clear: Obed, mixed-blood son of Boaz by the Moabite Ruth, is a descendant of Abraham and an ancestor of Israel’s greatest king. If even King David has mixed Israelite/Moabite ancestry, then certainly there are biblical grounds for setting aside the biblical law prohibiting contact with Moabites.

The Book of Ruth in the Larger Biblical Conversation

In some ways, the book of Ruth has a unique place within the Bible. One of only two books bearing the name of a woman (the other is Esther), it is the only book named for a non-Jewish character and one of a small number possibly written by a woman. Why, we might wonder, did the Holy Spirit inspire the writing of such a unique book? What can we learn from it as a resource for our own lives?

In Session 1, we mentioned that the Holy Spirit frequently inspired ancient writers to address issues of their own time by telling the story of something that happened in an earlier time. This allowed them to address contemporary hot-button issues without the flaring of emotions likely if they were to confront them more directly. Many biblical scholars believe that this was the case with Ruth.

The story is set in the time of the judges, but it is quite possible that it was actually written down generations later, in response to crises arising after the Babylonian Exile. The monarchy headed by Obed’s

descendant David lasted only a little more than 400 years before falling to the great Babylonian Empire in 597 BC. After the defeat, many Jews were deported forcibly to Babylon—the Babylonian Exile. The deportees remained there for almost 60 years, until Babylon was in its turn defeated by Persia in about 537 BC. The Persians allowed exiles who so chose to return home, and many did. They returned to a ruined land inhabited by a few poor Jews who had not been deported and by other peoples who had migrated into the land during the interim.

The pressures on the torn and divided Jewish community in the desolate land were intense. There was no king. The Temple was gone, destroyed by the Babylonians. Viewing the devastation, many people assumed that the god of Babylon must be stronger than the God of Israel, and they were afraid. In this setting, leaders turned to the Scripture both to understand what had happened and also to find a word of hope for the despairing community.

Some leaders concluded that the disaster had happened because the community had opened its boundaries too far, allowing undesirables (like Moabites) to enter and pollute the community's purity. These interpreters called for stricter adherence to biblical laws of separation as a way to protect the community's boundaries and secure a future for the people. Led by the scribe Ezra, representatives of this position took dramatic steps to implement what they saw as the literal reading of the biblical texts.

5. Read Ezra 9:1–4; 10:1–5. Then complete the following chart.

The “problem” identified: Ezra 9:1–4

The “solution” approved: Ezra 10:1–5

In contrast to this position, the book of Ruth argues that the Bible itself sets a higher priority than the literal reading of individual passages to discern who is welcome in the community. According to the book of Ruth, that higher priority is *hesed*. It is okay for the community's boundaries to be fluid and flexible. Living in loving loyalty to one another and, through one another, to God is the criterion for full membership in the community. If the spirit of loving loyalty to God and the community clashes with a specific biblical law, that specific law can be set aside for the higher priority. (See “From Fearful to Faithful,” page 18.)

Some of us may be troubled to hear that two biblical books disagree with one another. Isn't the Bible supposed to deliver one clear message to us? If the book of Ruth claims one thing and the book of Ezra another, how are we to know which position is “right”? These are important questions. Our fundamentalist friends tell us that the Bible proclaims unambiguous answers to all of life's questions. In this light, what are we to do with the clash between the books of Ruth and Ezra?

As Lutherans, we do not share the fundamentalist conviction that every word in the Bible is literally true and equally applicable to our lives. Following the lead of Martin Luther, we approach the Bible as a living conversation in which texts talk to each other, sometimes confirming and sometimes challenging one another. Far from giving us simple clear-cut answers to difficult questions, the Bible invites us to enter the conversation with confidence in the Spirit's guidance as together we struggle to discern how to live faithfully in the complex, ambiguous circumstances in which we find ourselves. Rather than choosing either Ezra or Ruth as “right,” the biblical conversation invites and challenges us to hear both texts and to ponder which text best equips us for faithful discipleship in our own time and place.

Although our community's situation certainly is different from that of the communities for which the books of Ruth and Ezra were written, the question they

raise—"who is welcome in this place?"—is as pressing today as it was centuries ago. Reading the book of Ruth in conversation with the book of Ezra helps us to see in vivid color what the issues and priorities were in that time and place, and invites us to ponder deeply exactly what our priorities are in discerning who is and who is not welcome in our community.

Acknowledging what our priorities are equips us to reflect further on whether they are the priorities to which the Spirit is calling us in our own time and place. As we do this, we are fortunate to have yet another biblical conversation partner to which we can turn for guidance.

6. Skim Matthew 1:1–17. What do you notice in these verses? Does anything seem at all unusual? If so, what?

Matthew's genealogy traces Israel's lineage all the way from Abraham to Jesus. The inclusion of women in an ancient genealogy is unusual, as are the particular women included in Jesus' genealogy. All but one, Mary, were foreigners. All were "tainted" by sexual circumstances initiated by them or done to them. It is from this motley mixed-blood crew that Jesus comes. Not only does Jesus come from them; his ministry demonstrates a definite bias for people in similar straits.

In contrast to those who would build high walls to protect the community's purity, Jesus reaches out to those excluded because of class, race, gender, and ethnic background, assuring them that they are welcome in the community of God's people. (See "Welcoming the Stranger," page 38.)

When God's hidden hand is fully revealed in the life and ministry of Jesus, Ruth's choice to live in *hesed* with all the heroic risks involved is affirmed and commended as a model for our lives. We don't need to live in fear of impurity as Ezra's community did. Through Jesus, we are free to live in the hope that inspires and sustains us as we extend to those who are very unlike us the kind of

extravagant loving loyalty through which God's hidden hand continues to work healing and welcome in our weary world.

- 7.** Ponder your congregation's priorities in answering the question, "who is welcome in this place?" How do they compare with those of the book of Ruth? Is there an action step you feel the Spirit is calling your congregation to take?
- 8.** When all is said and done, with which character in the book of Ruth do you identify most closely? Why? In light of your choice, what might the Spirit be saying to you through the study of the book of Ruth?

Looking Ahead

This concludes our study of the book of Ruth. Next month we will begin a three-month study of Daniel 1–6. Like Ruth, Daniel is an outsider. However, while Ruth is a Moabite transplanted to Israel, Daniel is an Israelite forcibly deported to serve in the royal palace of Babylon. There he and his friends exhibit *hesed* that leads them to heroic risks in order to continue their worship of the LORD. As in the book of Ruth, though often hidden from clear view, God is at work in sometimes mysterious but always life-giving ways.

Closing Prayer

Sing or read together verses 4 and 5 of "All Are Welcome" (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 641). Or close by praying together the Lord's Prayer. 

The Rev. Gwen Sayler is a professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. She is a deaconess in the Valparaiso Lutheran deaconess community and an ELCA pastor. **The Rev. Ann Fritschel** is associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Wartburg Seminary. She has served churches in Dickinson, Mohall, and Hamerly, N.D. She is the director of the Center for Global Theologies at the seminary.

WE GIVE THANKS

by Emily Hansen



"Thank You"

> from 84-year-old Lola in Kansas, who received financial help with her tuition thanks to a Woman of the ELCA scholarship (see the September 2008 issue of *LWT*).

> from Mary in Colorado who was able to receive culinary training and is gainfully employed for the first time in her life thanks to a Women of the ELCA grant (see page 34).

> from Jessica in Ohio who attended Women of the ELCA anti-racism training workshops and is now a trainer in her area (see page 38).

You may not recognize these names, but these women—and hundreds like them—give thanks for you regularly. Through your generous support, the lives of women around the world and their families have been made better and they are thankful.

We are thankful, too

The churchwide staff and volunteer members of Women of the ELCA board give thanks for you, too. Without you, the work that is done

in your name could not go forward. Whether you are a charter member of a unit or have only recently joined as an individual partner, know that we thank you for all you do to help spread the Good News through Women of the ELCA-sponsored events and programs.

Thankoffering services

Many of you are planning your annual Thankoffering service. The Thankofferings collected at these gatherings make up a significant portion of a self-supporting annual budget of Women of the ELCA; these gifts provide programs, resources, and events for women in congregational, intercongregational, and special units. Thankofferings also support the organization's gift to the ELCA.

In this issue we offer resources that may be helpful to you as you plan your service. We also encourage you to read the two articles that immediately follow this one to see more of the first-person benefits your generous, faithful support makes possible.

Facts

- Since 1988, the Women of the ELCA has awarded grants totaling more than \$3 million for efforts here and abroad that promote healthier lives for women and girls.
- Your designated gifts have provided more than \$450,000 in scholarships to about 350 recipients since 1994, assisting Lutheran women ages 21 to 80-plus in continuing their education.

RESOURCES

Ideas online

If you are planning a Thankoffering service or devotion, you can find help on the Women of the ELCA Web site at www.womenoftheelca.org. Taking time to hold a Thankoffering service or devotion gives you an opportunity to display photos and stories that represent the people served by your gifts. It is a time for women to celebrate and reaffirm their commitment to sharing the gospel.

Resources for stewardship

The *Stewardship Planning Guide 2008-2009* offers tools to help you connect to and challenge one another in your community of faith. This free stewardship resource can be found at www.womenoftheelca.org. Included in the guide are detailed explanations of ways to give, gift descriptions, and our various stewardship partnerships and resources. An offering report describing how our gifts were used in the previous fiscal year is also in the guide, as are a new Thankoffering service (celebrated by over 2,000 women at the 2008 Triennial Gathering in Salt Lake City) and 2009 monthly devotions.

A Thankoffering devotion*

Philippians 4:9

Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

One way we can live out what we have received and heard is to share our faith stories with others, including our experience of stewardship. By actively engaging women in our faith community, we will grow as an organization. Article II of the Women of the ELCA Constitution states that in order to accomplish our organization's purpose, Women of the ELCA shall "Equip participants and encourage all to grow as whole persons, value themselves and others, articulate and act upon their faith, and witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ."

Encouraging each person to grow in faith, we are called to be stewardship mentors. Acting on our faith, we desire to transform and change the world around us. That desire motivates us to be good stewards and we share that desire with others in our community.

Our Thankofferings support the total outreach of the ELCA, including specific programs of the women's organization. Each year these gifts support important programs, resources, and initiatives for women and communities throughout the greater church.

As we build community with our sisters, studying the Bible and praying together, we learn to share our faith with those outside our circle. When we engage others in a Thankoffering service or devo-

tion, we offer them an opportunity to be a witness for God through faithful stewardship. By planning or participating in a Thankoffering service, we are not only celebrating the generous giving of our faith community, but we are letting others know that we are committed to stewardship as a part of our life in the faith.

There is peace in knowing that we are fulfilling our purpose and the call to participate in the stewardship growth of others.

Offering Prayer:

Good and gracious God, help us to recognize what we have received and learned in you. As representatives of God's grace and peace, may we endeavor to be mentors to others so we may continue to grow in both our faith and our ministries. Amen. 

* Adapted from the 2008-2009 Women of the ELCA Stewardship Guide

Emily Hansen is an associate for programs in the areas of grants, scholarships, and stewardship for Women of the ELCA.

Thank you!

To send your Thankoffering, make your check payable to Women of the ELCA, and write "Thankoffering" on the memo line. Give the check to your unit's treasurer, or mail it to Women of the ELCA, P.O. Box 71256, Chicago, IL 60694-1256.

FROM DEPENDENCY TO SELF-SUFFICIENCY

by Terri Lackey

Friendship and support of other women got the highest marks when a recent Women of the ELCA survey asked participants what they liked best about the organization.

And what better place is there than around a table with food to seal those friendships and offer support? That's what makes a 2008 grant awarded by Women of the ELCA to Work Options for Women (WOW) in Denver, Colorado, so delectable.

WOW offers culinary job training to women down on their luck. Women who are homeless, on welfare, or have other employment barriers learn to chop, cut, cook, serve, and clean up. They also learn important job skills, like arriving at work on time, punching time cards, and respecting management. Once their classes are complete, WOW finds them jobs in cafeterias, school lunchrooms, airport restaurants, and other kitchens. WOW sticks with them, too, ensuring their progress on the job for up to three years and offering support if times get tough.

"WOW is the best chance for women to build a new life for themselves and their children," said Toni Schmid, executive director of

WOW. "It is not uncommon for women who have failed in several job-training programs to finally gain the job and life skills at WOW that they need to secure long-term employment."

Schmid offers as an example Mary, a recent WOW graduate who speaks with "pride about her new job and how excited she is to be working." Mary has impressed her new supervisors so much that she is in line for a promotion and raise, Schmid said.

And there's Erica, a food service worker featured in WOW's newsletter, *Worksheet*, for completing two years of employment. Erica is a single mom who couldn't read or write when she started training at WOW. "With the right combination of encouragement, motivation, and support, Erica learned that she possessed many talents that counterbalanced her limitations," according to the newsletter feature. She is a team player, positive, dependable, and punctual.

"Your investment in Work Options for Women is giving individuals the chance to move from dependency to self-sufficiency, from



poverty to success," Schmid wrote in a letter to Emily Hansen, coordinator of Women of the ELCA's grants program. "Thank you for Women of the ELCA's support."

During 2005–2008, your gifts of about \$250,000 to the Women of the ELCA grants program were awarded to health projects that raise up healthy women and girls. In 2008, about \$75,000 went to 36 programs—28 domestic and eight international. Proposals for 2009 grants will be accepted between December 15 and February 15, 2009. Visit www.womenoftheelca.org.whatwedo/grants.html for more information.

2008 DOMESTIC GRANT RECIPIENTS BY SYNODICAL REGION

SAFEPLACE (1C), \$3,500

Domestic violence counseling provides individual counseling sessions and support groups for survivors of domestic violence and sexual assault.

AMERICAN DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CRISIS LINE (1E), \$2,500

Volunteer advocate training program trains volunteer advocates who provide domestic violence and child abuse support to American citizens overseas on a 24-hour toll-free crisis line accessible from 175 countries.

CITY IMPACT, INC. (2B), \$2,500

Family resource center offers access to community resources for emergency needs, healthcare services, transportation needs, and other support services for women and their families.

ESCALANTE HEATH CENTER (2D), \$1,500

You GO Girl! project offers sports physicals, free of charge, to uninsured and underserved girls attending public school so they may participate in sports and other activities.

WORK OPTIONS FOR WOMEN (2E), \$1,500

TWOW culinary training and life skills and job placement services for poor and homeless women moving from poverty to self-sufficiency.

FIGHTING ABUSE IN THE HOME (FAITH) (2E), \$2,000

Domestic and teen dating violence program helps underserved and low-income young women through experiences of domestic violence or teen dating violence.

FAMILY OF GOD LUTHERAN CHURCH (3D), \$2,000

Becoming Free! Becoming Me!, a financial stewardship ministry program, assists a diverse range of women, empowering them with training and resources in financial and debt management.

EVERYDAY MIRACLES (3G), \$3,500

Doula program provides prenatal and post-partum education along with doula (professional labor support) to low-income women at risk for poor birth outcomes.

TRUE LIGHT FAMILY RESOURCE CENTER (4B), \$2,500

Emancipation Station program provides enrichment and empowerment programming in a daytime shelter setting for homeless women.

LUTHERAN SOCIAL SERVICES OF THE SOUTH (4D), \$1,500

Diabetes prevention program affords uninsured and low-income women and girls the education and supplies needed to prevent or alleviate diabetes through lifestyle changes.

HILL COUNTRY MISSION FOR HEALTH, INC. (4E), \$3,500

Healthcare services project offers free or low-cost healthcare to uninsured women and their families.

MUTUAL GROUND, INC. (5A), \$3,000

Domestic violence women's advocacy program offers counseling and support to female Hispanic victims of domestic violence.

CONCORDIA AVONDALE CAMPUS (5A), \$2,000

Adult education project supports women seeking to improve their lives by acquiring English language skills, high school education certification, and computer skills.

CHURCHES UNITED OF THE QUAD CITIES (5B), \$3,000

Winnie's Place, a homeless shelter for women, provides food, clothing, support services, medicine, and counseling.

HOME OF THE SPARROW, INC. (5B), \$2,000

Women's shelter offering life skills on how to become self-sufficient through job training skills, financial responsibility, education, parenting, and advocacy.

LUTHERAN SERVICES IN IOWA (5D), \$1,500

Challenges program offers in-patient treatment for girls ages 5 to 15 who have sexual victimization and behavioral problems.

WOMEN'S RESOURCE CENTER OF RACINE (5J), \$2,000

Family violence advocacy network offers safety planning and other services to victims of family violence. Also provides community education and advocacy training.

WHITINGTON HOMES (6C), \$3,000

Mentoring program pairs two adult women with female resident of Whitington Homes, many of whom are teens who are pregnant or young mothers who have been abused.

SALEM LUTHERAN CHURCH (6D), \$1,500

GEM (God Empowering Mothers) support group offers life skills, health issues awareness, and recreation to mothers in the community.

ROSELAWN LUTHERAN (6F), \$3,000

Healthy Choices project offers an extended food pantry to women of color and their children. In addition to food, they offer nutritional and health education and health screenings.

PILGRIM JOURNEY COMMUNITY CHURCH (7A), \$3,000

Women's support group provides a safe and healing support environment for immigrant women to express themselves and share their experiences.

TRINITY LUTHERAN CHURCH (7C), \$2,500

Women Moving Forward "Mujeres en Progreso" offers weekly support workshops for poor Latina women addressing themes of domestic violence, access to healthcare, HIV/AIDS, and depression.

LUTHERAN CHURCH OF THE HOLY COMMUNION (7F), \$3,000

The Welcome Center offers a place of hospitality, engagement, nourishment, and resources for homeless women and children with special group services and individual counseling.

LUTHERAN IMMIGRATION AND REFUGEE SERVICE (8F), \$3,500

Women's Empowerment Sustainability Project helps empower refugee women as they build on their strengths to integrate economically and socially into U.S. society.

N STREET VILLAGE (8G), \$2,000

Nutrition awareness project encourages good nutritional choices and weight loss for homeless and low-income women.

WEST VIRGINIA COMMUNITY SERVICES FOR WOMEN (9A), \$1,000

Women's Centers offer services, training, clothing, and other support needs to low-income women who are interviewing for employment.

REFORMATION LUTHERAN CHURCH (9C), \$2,000

Summer SPLASH program offers a program for refugee and immigrant children ages 4 to 14 to learn English, math, and other life skills

BETHEL FREE HEALTH CLINIC (9D), \$3,000

Healthy Coast Women project offers screening, treatment, education, and patient sharing as a means to prevent heart disease, diabetes, and stroke in women of the Mississippi Gulf Coast.

2008 INTERNATIONAL GRANT RECIPIENTS BY COUNTRY

INDIA

NEW EARTH TEAM, \$1,000

Reproductive health care for tribal women educates women and girls in reproductive health care, low-cost herbal medicines, and health and nutritional enhancement through gardening.

BADVEL TALUK LAND DEVELOPMENT, \$1,000

Sustainable development program for women who receive milking animals and instruction as a way to improve their health and economic status.

KENYA

SUNSHINE YOUTH GROUP, \$1,000

Offers support to female teenage orphans who are victims of abuse, sexual exploitation, and child labor.

LIBERIA

NATIONAL LUTHERAN CHURCH WOMEN

FELLOWSHIP SELF-ESTEEM AND EMPOWERMENT PROGRAM, \$1,000

Trains and empowers women who are victims of violent civil unrest on the subjects of self-respect, self-esteem, and positive body image.

PERU

D.B. PERU MIDWIFE TRAINING PROGRAM, \$1,000

Provides training for midwives in the Peruvian Amazon to reduce the rate of infant and maternal mortality.

TANZANIA

PANGARO WATER SYSTEM, \$1,000

Helps complete a complex water system

in the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Tanzania's Pare Diocese so women can have access to clean water, eliminate water hauling, and promote crop production through irrigation.

UGANDA

COMMUNITY ACTION FOR DEVELOPMENT, LOCAL POULTRY PROJECT, \$1,000

Improves women's health through economic enhancement and nutrition that results from raising poultry.

YOUTH ASSOCIATION FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT, HIV/AIDS PROGRAM, \$1,000

An HIV/AIDS awareness program and series of workshops conducted in communities and schools in Nyenga.



HOW YOU CAN HELP

You can help Women of the ELCA continue to support programs, and ministries that work to improve the lives of women. To give to the grants fund, send your check, made payable to Women of the ELCA Grants Program No. 528, to Women of the ELCA, 8765 W. Higgins Road, Chicago, IL 60631.

A new way to grow!

Invite the women you love into the community you cherish.



For only \$20 a year, you can nurture the faith that lives in them by making them individual partners in Women of the ELCA. They will receive one-year subscriptions to *Lutheran Woman Today* and *Café*. They will have access to Bible studies, global networks, and advocacy efforts as well as the fellowship, friendship, and support that has meant so much to you.

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\$20 a year for each new partner. Please make your check payable to Women of the ELCA and write "Individual Partnerships" in the memo line. For multiple gifts, information may be enclosed on a separate sheet. Mail to: Augsburg Fortress, Women of the ELCA Individual Partnerships, Attn: subscription department, P.O. Box 1553, Minneapolis, MN 55440-8730

WELCOMING THE STRANGER

by Jessica Lee

When I moved back to my hometown to be closer to my family, finding a new church home was important to me. Though I had grown up Baptist, Lutheran theology better expressed my adult Christian faith. So I visited one church's Saturday evening service; it was small and informal—no music, just word and communion. After the prayers we passed the peace. Well, *they* passed the peace. I was left holding my hand out, feeling very uncomfortable as the other eight people shook each other's hands. When it suddenly dawned on someone that I should be included, one person tentatively moved toward me and gave me the cold no-grip shake. Most of the others followed suit, but I felt like a leper. Did they see in my black skin a warning to stay away, even in the house of the Lord?

Needless to say, I never went back, and this experience is still fresh in my mind five years later.

The community with whom you choose to worship should feel right, welcoming, and nourishing to the spirit. No church will be right

for everyone, but the congregation shouldn't turn people off at first visit because of unfriendliness, prejudice, or bias against visitors. Churches often use the slogan, "All are welcome." But is this always true?

We are brothers and sisters in Christ; we should live in Christian community—faithfulness, openness, acceptance, and forgiveness. If we behave in ways that are un-Christian, we are called to right those wrongs.

How often do you ignore a visitor in your midst, someone of color, someone who doesn't quite look like the rest of your congregation? Look at your own congregation: What is the racial makeup? How does your congregation treat visitors? Are you welcoming, inviting? Does your church feel like home for a new person?

Today's Dream: Tomorrow's Reality

Working with Today's Dream: Tomorrow's Reality (TDTR) anti-racism education network sponsored by the Women of the ELCA has helped open my eyes. Where I used to see life, the world, and the

church through my own experiences, I now have a better understanding of how others feel.

Working with TDTR, I have the opportunity to talk with people from all backgrounds and look at ways to make our church friendlier, more welcoming, more like the family in Christ that we are meant to be. We all have gifts the Lord can use.

The story of Ruth is an excellent example of how God calls the unlikely one and uses creative and unexpected paths to achieve God's goal. The Bible gives us many other examples of unlikely leaders who through their faith accomplish amazing things. By opening our hearts, changing our perceptions, and simply being welcoming, we can extend the invitation into God's kingdom to so many more people.

Who's in and who's out

Congregations must learn to embrace change. Every congregation has roots, history, and a legacy, but if we lose all our members because we fear change, no one will be left to carry on the mission. Some

people feel that maintaining the status quo and avoiding change helps the church retain its identity. But we miss opportunities by doing things the way we always have. Congregational growth is exciting. I enjoy praying, working, sharing, and serving with my fellow Christians. And we could get so much more from church if our congregations were made up of more people who look nothing like me, who grew up in different cultures—different countries even—and who were born long before or long after I was.

Look at your community of faith: Who is in and who is out? When a visitor comes to your church what do they experience? If I were a visitor would I come back? Ask yourself why or why not. Every congregation should honestly consider whether they are welcoming to those who look and act different than they do. Start by asking yourself what type of visitor usually walks through your doors. Do they come back for a second visit? Who stays and who never comes back?

living your values

What does your church community value most? Music? Money? The building? Attendance? Faith? Service? Fellowship? Experience? The reason I attend my church is because it values service, diversity, justice, faith, and inclusivity. We are one of two Reconciling in Christ

(RIC) congregations in our synod. (Reconciling in Christ is a program that acknowledges congregations that welcome gay and lesbian people.) We have about a 50-50 racial mix. We have a committee that focuses on justice and service because part of our Christian duty is being involved with the greater community. Christians are required to do more than just go to church on Sundays. If visitors agree with our idea of church, then they stay—they're in. For some, the idea of an RIC church is enough to make them run for the hills.

Do the people you worship with share your values? Do you reflect your values in the way you live? The Bible, the Word of God, is to be our guide. The voice of the Holy Spirit is its counterpart.

Do you reach out to others? Does your congregation treat visitors with radical hospitality? Do visitors feel noticed, welcomed, or comfortable, or do they feel ignored, unwanted, or out of place?

Growth is a result of our faith: Growth as we study the Bible, engage more deeply in prayer, become part of a Christian community, and engage in evangelism. By challenging ourselves to open our doors, our hearts, and our Christian communities to strangers, visitors, and our neighbors, we are growing in Christian faith. We are heeding the call to be more like Jesus.

I hope that the next time a visitor comes to your church, you will welcome him or her with an open heart, a warm handshake, and the love of Jesus. ☺

Jessica Lee is a member of Hope Lutheran, Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where she leads the stewardship committee. She also serves on the synod council and the anti-racism training team. She is a social worker in a nursing home.

Women of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, by action of the Triennial Convention, is committed to developing an anti-racist identity, and anti-racism programming is a priority for the organization and its executive board.

TDTR workshops are available in many areas and can be adapted to your needs. A one-day workshop features:

- a Bible study based on Acts 10, which begins each of four sessions;
- defining racism and recognizing God's call to battle against it; and
- introductions to the concepts of institutional racism, white privilege, and cultural conditioning.

For more information about offering a TDTR workshop in your synod or congregation, call or e-mail Women of the ELCA associate for programs Inez Torres Davis, 800-638-3522, ext. 2428; ineztorres.davis@elca.org.



WE RECOMMEND

Resources for action, advocacy, programs, or further study



Lutherans respond to Midwest disaster

When disaster strikes, Lutherans are quick to bring healing and hope. "After the Floods" is a five-minute video about how members of the ELCA serve as beacons of hope to communities recovering from the 2008 floods and tornadoes in the Midwest. View it on the new ELCA Web site at www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action.aspx. Click on the Disaster Response tab.

Read about other ways members of the ELCA are making the world a better place on the new Web site. In far reaches of the globe, and right in your own neighborhood, Lutherans do more than talk about their beliefs. They put them into action.

Buy a cookbook, help Lutheran causes

A new collection of recipes, stories, and table blessings to prepare global dishes for your family and congregation is available from Augsburg Fortress. *Food for Life: Recipes and Stories on the Right to Food* highlights the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) and the ELCA World Hunger Appeal. Co-produced by LWF, the ELCA, and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada, the cookbook (item no. 9786000221744) is available for \$14 by calling 800-328-4648 or on-line at www.augsburgfortress.org/store.

New free resource on financial wellness

Grace-Full Living: A Retreat Resource for Women on Spirituality and Money is available for download at www.womenoftheelca.org or by calling 800-638-3522, ext.

2737. This financial wellness resource created by Women of the ELCA and the ELCA Board of Pensions addresses stewardship and faith issues. It can be used as a tool in a retreat or workshop.

The resource helps women look at their past experiences with money and offers exercises on their motivation for giving and saving. In *Grace-Full Living*, The Rev. Catherine Malotky, a retirement planning manager for the ELCA Board of Pensions and "Amen" columnist for *Lutheran Woman Today*, provides information on ways to achieve financial security.

Do a good deed—recycle your phone

Women of the ELCA is working with the Women's Funding Network, the Good Deed Foundation, and other partners on a campaign to recycle 250,000 cell phones by May 1. Two-thirds of revenue received from this recycling effort will be invested in programs that build women's financial assets, job opportunities, skills, and entrepreneurship. Women of the ELCA is one of 128 organizations that are a part of the Women's Funding Network.

According to the Good Deed Foundation Web site, recycling 1 million cell phones reduces greenhouse gas emissions equal to taking 1,368 cars off the road for one year and recycling 10 million cell phones would save enough energy to power more than 194,000 U.S. households with electricity for one year. To find out how to recycle your phone, visit the Web site at www.gooddeedfoundation.org.



GRACE NOTES

Sow Bountifully

by Linda Post Bushkofsky



I know a congregation

that sponsored a young refugee family in the 1970s, helping them settle into a new life in this country. The refugees were not Christian, but they accepted the Christ-inspired assistance of this Lutheran congregation: furniture, clothing, and English-language classes. As the family assimilated into American life, they moved away and contact with the congregation waned.

Fast-forward 20 years or so. One of the children of the refugee family was now grown and ready to marry. With thanksgiving for the support received from the congregation years earlier and in celebration of their child's marriage, the parents sent a significant monetary gift to the Lutheran congregation. The giving had come full circle.

This story reminds me of Apostle Paul's exhortations to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians Paul lifts up the churches in Macedonia as examples of generous givers to a fund he had created for the church in Jerusalem, a people in need (2 Corinthians 8:2-4).

Paul compares the Corinthians with the Macedonians, reminding the Corinthians that they excel in everything—speech, knowledge, eagerness—and asks them to also excel in their giving. He points out that “it is a question of a fair balance between your present abundance and their need” (2 Corinthians 8:13b-14a).

The congregation and refugee family lived out that fair balance. The congregation gave of its abundance when the

refugee family first came to the United States. When the family had obtained prosperity, it gave from its abundance to the congregation.

Paul admonishes the Corinthians: “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work” (2 Corinthians 9:6-8).

How is the sowing in your congregational unit of Women of the ELCA these days? Are you sowing sparingly? Are you sowing bountifully?

For those who have been holding onto assets, even for a rainy day, read Paul's words to the Corinthians. You have been generously blessed. It is a privilege to share, just as the churches in Macedonia learned.

I encourage you especially to consider designated gifts to specific ministries of Women of the ELCA. Your designated gift to our grants program, for instance, supports our annual domestic and international grants that allow our organization “to promote healing and wholeness in the church, the society, and the world” (from our Purpose Statement). Through these grants, the lives of women and girls are transformed. ■

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



AMEN!

Choosing Curiosity

by Catherine Malotky

God, I believe you
made me and all creatures. I believe we all exist because of your intention. While it is true that we can distort the beauty of your creation in us, each of us has our beginnings in your imagination.

Now think of the way we have regarded each other through history. Human beings have so often chosen to fear those who are different. Even our Scriptures record stories that relate the rules by which our forebears in faith judged others. The story of Ruth and Naomi builds on the rule to despise Moabites. There had been conflict between the Hebrews and the Moabites, and the ill will between the two peoples slowly simmered and finally poisoned their relationship.

We have all seen this dynamic in our recent history. We did not understand the way our native cousins lived on this land. Where they saw a garden to be tended, we saw a wilderness to be conquered. The gap of misunderstanding filled in with violence and judgment, and before long murder was in the air.

But we did not reserve our fear just for those with different colored skin. How many of us have memories of questioning the ways and wisdom of Lutherans who worshiped in German instead of Norwegian, or Danish instead of Swedish? How many Lutheran churches were built within blocks of each other because those gaps were too wide to bridge . . . and are still? How many of us, if we are honest, are surprised to hear “Lutheran” spoken in Spanish or Laotian

or Liberian? And how many of us who speak Spanish or Laotian or Liberian can feel that gap of misunderstanding even on Sunday morning?

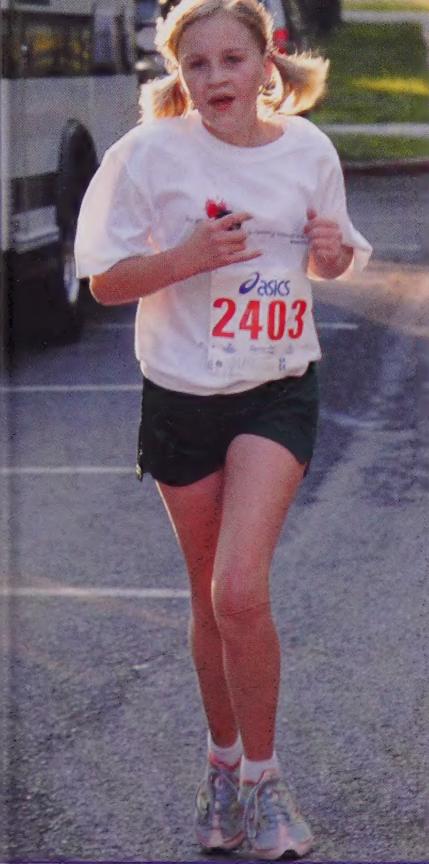
We are more comfortable with others like us, whether we are alike in ethnicity, history, class, political persuasion, life style, educational level, religion, age, or color. So when we deal with others who are different from us, we are predisposed to choose judgment instead of curiosity. But we lose.

Recall Ruth’s and Naomi’s determination as they returned to Bethlehem knowing the scorn they were likely to face because Ruth was a Moabite. Imagine their courage as they plotted to secure their future, first wooing and then recruiting Boaz, who had so much more to lose. If Boaz had chosen to judge, their plan would have failed. But instead of seeing Ruth through the lens of fear, Boaz chose curiosity and mercy. He saw God’s hand in Ruth’s loyalty to Naomi.

If Boaz had chosen the comfortable way and followed the old rules, he would have missed a future with Ruth. She changed him, no doubt, but he was also blessed by her. Might God also challenge us to look on others with curiosity instead of fear and judgment? Might the change that comes be a blessing, as it was for Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz?

Teach us, God, to be curious rather than afraid. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

The Rev. Catherine Malotky serves the ELC Board of Pensions as retirement planning manager. She has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.



Nearly 400 women, girls, and men participated in the second-ever Run, Walk, 'n' Roll in Salt Lake City during the Triennial Gathering. This year's event raised more than \$50,000 to support Women of the ELCA's ongoing health commitment to women and girls.

Zoe Zieter, 11, of Green Bay, Wisconsin, raised \$500 in pledges to participate in the Run, Walk, 'n' Roll. A member of St. John's Lutheran Church, Zoe had heard about the event that helps the Raising Up Healthy Women and Girls initiative from her grandmother, Julie Johnson, also a member of St. John's.

Susan Drane, president of the Grand Canyon Synodical Women's Organization, raised more than \$5,200 for the Run, Walk, 'n' Roll. The ELCA Board of Pensions sponsored the run with a gift of \$8,500.

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